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# The Wrong Way To Protect Secrets

ADRIAN WALKER, a former CIA officer, has been convicted of espionage. The conviction is a landmark case, the first since the 1950s in which a former CIA officer has been convicted of espionage. Walker, 42, was sentenced to life in prison. He was charged with passing secrets to the Soviet Union. The case has raised questions about the effectiveness of the polygraph test, which Walker had failed. The Walker case is a warning to the intelligence community that the polygraph test is not foolproof. It is a test of the machine, not the man. The more skillful the spy, the less likely a lie detector will catch him. Reliance on the polygraph could easily encourage the pursuit of mistaken leads and create a false sense of security, while overlooking the real spies.

First, the Walker case, if convicted, will show that the current chair of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, who was the chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, would rarely be expected to be caught. Spies are never caught, because we hope to convert them into double agents or because the "damage" to national security would be aggravated by disclosure of further secrets. When we do convict spies, we tend to trade them for agents of our own. As Henry Schwartz, chief of the American Civil Liberties Union has pointed out, an executed spy is the bargaining chip. Third, the theoretical prospect of the death penalty is not likely to have much effect on the cold-blooded spy. Traitors for hire, like killers for hire, do not expect to be caught. For them, the difference between life imprisonment and a death sentence is meaningless. Similarly, it seems that use of the polygraph would do little to address weaknesses the Walker case illustrates. The problems with polygraph testing is that it affects nervousness, not lies. It makes the finger of guilt at nervous innocent people while it makes the calculating liar. Even polygraph advocates can damn with both hands. A 1983 report pre-

pared by a Pentagon panel that included the military's chief polygraph examiner concluded that the technology "works better than chance." Small comfort.

Moreover, as Congress's Office of Technology Assessment notes, polygraph testing is open to a number of "countermeasures" — physical and mental means by which a subject can trick the machine. The more skillful the spy, the less likely a lie detector will catch him. Reliance on the polygraph could easily encourage the pursuit of mistaken leads and create a false sense of security, while overlooking the real spies.

The death penalty and polygraph exemplify a get-tough approach that makes us feel good but accomplishes little. At hand are less dramatic, more effective proposals.

There seems to be a developing consensus that one feature of our security system above all others has contributed to the crisis: too many people have access to classified material. Before we can cut down on the number of security clearances, we have to address a second feature: excessive classification. When everything is classified, everyone must have a clearance, even to do the most ordinary work. If we classify only what is valuable to the Kremlin, we could focus our resources on safeguarding that information.

The Administration, which shares blame for overclassifying information, recognizes that in its efforts to protect everything it has hampered its ability to protect anything. As Attorney General Edwin Meese 3d has said: "A lot of things which shouldn't be classified are, and therefore there is a kind of ho-hum attitude toward the protection of national security information."

If the Reagan Administration cuts back on the amount of information classified and the number of people with clearances, we can then address a third problem: the sizeable backlog in clearance checks. Follow-up investigations are supposed to be made every five years for access to top secret data, but recertifications are running 10 years behind. We should regularly recheck cleared employees and cancel the clearances of those who no longer need them. Finally, we should redouble efforts against the real culprits — the thousands of KGB and Eastern bloc agents operating in this country. They should be the focus of our attention, not the millions of Americans who serve in the military and defense-related industries.

In our eagerness to do something in response to the Walker allegations, let us at least take the time to do something effective.

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